

Quick Facts

About...Hand Washing

Why is hand washing important?

Hand washing is the single most effective means of preventing the spread of infections. Many diseases, such as: the common cold, influenza (flu), ear infections, strep throat, diarrhea, and other intestinal problems, can be spread by unwashed or improperly washed hands.

How are diseases spread?

Bacteria and viruses that cause disease can get on your hands in many ways, such as: handling food or animals, touching doorknobs, shaking hands, using phone receivers or computer keyboards, and using the toilet. You can reduce the spread of many bacteria and viruses by properly washing your hands with soap and water.

When should I wash my hands?

Always wash your hands:

- After using the toilet
- After helping someone else use the toilet
- After changing a diaper
- After helping someone who is ill
- After blowing your nose, sneezing, or coughing
- Before, during, and after food preparation, especially raw foods
- Before eating
- After handling soiled utensils and equipment
- After handling garbage
- After handling money
- After handling animals, especially reptiles, (e.g., iguanas, turtles, or snakes) or livestock (e.g., cattle, pigs, or sheep)

Always wash your hands before you touch your eyes, nose, mouth, or ears.

How do I properly wash my hands?

- Wet hands with running water
- Lather hands with soap
- Wash the palms, back of hands, between fingers, and under fingernails for at least 15 seconds (about the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice)
- Rinse with running water
- Pat hands dry, beginning at the wrist and moving downward

- Turn off water by using a disposable paper towel

How can hand washing protect me and my family?

Keeping your hands clean is one of the most important ways you can avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others. Food-borne illness outbreaks often are caused by poor hygiene, usually unwashed or poorly washed hands on the part of the foodhandler. Many diarrheal illnesses, such as: salmonellosis, hepatitis A, and shigellosis can be spread from person to person when someone does not wash their hands after using the toilet and then passes the bacteria or virus by handling food, shaking hands, or touching other objects. If the bacteria or virus gets into another person's mouth then that person becomes sick. Unwashed or poorly washed hands are responsible for 1 in 4 food-borne illnesses.

Proper hand washing is everyone's responsibility:

- Parents should teach their children the proper way to wash their hands.
- Children should see their parents and other care providers washing their hands properly and frequently.
- Consumers need to let restaurants, daycares, health care providers, hospitals, and nursing homes know they are concerned about personal hygiene and the proper use of hand washing to help control infections.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov/cleanhands>

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